*Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage*

Heath, S. B. *Words at work and play: Three decades in family and community life.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-521-60303-4 (paperback.). 221 pp.

Robert J. LeBlanc, University of Pennsylvania

Nearly 30 years after the publication of her landmark work, *Ways with Words* (1983), educational ethnographer Shirley Brice Heath returns to the lives of her original participants from the Piedmont Carolinas in her latest contribution, *Words at Work and Play* (2012) to uncover the impact of economic instability, changing family dynamics, social mobility, and geographic distribution on language practices. Her study—a multi-sited ethnography that spreads from Illinois, Texas, and the Carolinas—describes the literate lives of dozens of characters as they contend with the fall-out of the most recent economic recession and the challenges of evolving family structures in an age of dual-income households and massive geographic dispersal. *Words at Work and Play* demonstrates the great capacity of longitudinal ethnographic research—what Heath calls "being long in company" (p. 8)—and serves as an allegory for the tumultuous changes faced by ordinary people in the United States.

The bulk of the eight chapters portray a thickly textured account of the daily lives and literacy practices of individuals and families. Heath begins Chapter 1 with a comprehensive look back at the families of *Ways with Words*, and paints a picture of 1970's rural America for two communities, Trackton (African-American working class) and Roadville (White working class), in an age when the benefits of the civil rights movement were still emerging in the South and sustained conversation around the dinner table was ubiquitous. Chapter 2 outlines the genesis of her project—a chance meeting in Chicago between Heath and the lost child of one of her original participants' from the Piedmont Carolinas. This meeting and their subsequent friendship serves as the fulcrum of Heath's narrative, introducing the reader to the various themes of the research (notably the impact of families' vast geographic separation on language practices) and highlighting the necessity for community participation in this type of research; Heath soon has people of various ages conducting research in their own communities as a way to understand the changing dynamics of their lives. The chapters that follow attend to separate issues, centered on a particular family or community: geographic movement (Chapter 3), entering higher education (Chapter 5), dynamics of play in a technological world (Chapter 6), and changes in parental roles in an era of "proliferating choices" (Chapter 8). While language use is at the core of each of these chapters, language is always situated socially, and with a strong economic bent.

Of tantamount use to graduate students and emerging ethnographers are the two appendices: *A: Ethnography as biography and autobiography* and *B: On methods of social history and ethnography*. Both provide a valuable 'behind the scenes' look at the intricacies of ethnographic research, as well as the incorporation of autobiographical

elements which detail the emergence and persistence of her research questions throughout the process. These chapters represent the book's great strength as tools for thinking through the production of ethnography and the centrality of personal intuition and partiality in systematic data-gathering and analyses. They also mark this book as generically different from her previous research and more reflective of the literary or post-modern turn in ethnographic research (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). However, Heath's research remains a firmly realist project, and while she catalogues her interactions with participants throughout the book, she does not concern herself with the sort of superfluous personal introspection that has plagued ethnography for the past generation (Zenker & Kumoll, 2010).

The primary contribution of Heath's original work, *Ways with Words* (1983), was the immense explanatory power it provided to literacy scholars and educators in order to demonstrate the culturally situated nature of literacy practices in and out of school. While a number of studies were emerging at this time in what has now come to be called the "new sociology of education" (Apple, 1982; Wexler, 1987), most notably the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), Heath's work demonstrated just how complex the reproductive process of schooling was for children insofar as schools attempted to naturalize various practices that were culturally structured. Whereas Bourdieu's work on French schools highlighted the subtle means by which high culture (art, literature, opera, etc.) operated as a fine net that excluded many and included few in the ranks of education, Heath's work offered a companion explanation to social and economic reproduction in schools that focused on the means by which different 'ways with words' were produced at home for children, and then welcomed or denied validity at schools (mirroring what Silverstein [1979] called 'language ideologies'). Given the tenor of critically minded academic research at the time, Heath's study was seized upon by teachers and scholars alike, effectively inaugurating the field of New Literacy Studies (cf. Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2000; Street, 1985, 1995) as the most important and influential work of the subject.

*Words at Work and Play* makes a much more subtle argument, and one that hinges on describing the sort of micro-interactions facilitated by changes to work patterns, family life, and communal organization in a post-industrial economy for those who have risen to the ranks of the middle class and those who continue to view history from 'below.' Heath goes to great lengths with charts of question types, maps of participants' movements, and thick description to demonstrate the dissolution of community relations and the subsequent collapse of social capital for many of her original participants and their families—paralleling both the statistical work of Robert Putnam (2000) and the ethnographic work of Annette Lareau (2003). In short, Heath describes what Habermas would call the "colonization of the lifeworld" (Habermas, 1987), the increasing encroachment of economic logic and influence on the minutiae of daily life in a manner that is ultimately detrimental insofar as it reduces both the time and capacity for rich communal interactions. For example, in regards to family dynamics she writes:

> The original Trackton and Roadville communities and their ancestors had always moved as *families*, viewing with sadness and suspicion individuals who went far away from the family. However, with the first moves away from Trackton and

> Roadville in the 1980s, *individuals* as well as families moved… As the strains of the double dip economic recession pulled families apart, divorce and separation created single-parent households. (p. 63)
>
> In the 1970s, family and neighborhood life had generated multiple opportunities for talk and action centered on need, ready tools, local open spaces, and close-up models. But with each new decade, families did not generate the human resources to provide the quantity and quality of talk and experience necessary to socialize children for adaptive competence. (p. 65).

At times, this sort of analysis dances closely to the economism of a former age and a deficitizing account of students' literacy lives, but Heath is careful in later chapters to describe the creative and agentive work of students using digital technology, and highlight the potential for creating new forms of social capital through group-work and differentiated talk: for example, she writes about digital collaborative projects: "The strength behind the ethos of collaborative work in situations of collective endeavor… comes from the mix of talk. Interweaving personal experience with retrieval references and with hypothetical projections creates the common purpose of project work" (p. 148). While a significant portion of Heath's analysis may be viewed as a lamentation for the kinds of tectonic shifts families have faced, she does not ignore the opportunities for social mobility and the continual parental engagement in children's lives that time has afforded.

Combining a palpable nostalgia for the rich communal interactions described in her original study with a generous account of the future of literacy practices in the "accelerating layered commercially driven pace of activities and demands on the time of young and old" (p. 162), Heath offers a sober look at what modernity has wrought and what it has gifted. This book is ideal for scholars of literacy, but also for teachers who are interested in a 'community' approach to literacy learning. By taking "the long view" (p. 162) over 30 years of careful attention to her participants and friends, *Words at Work and Play* provides a moving series of narratives that serve as a synecdoche for the implications of broader systemic changes on the daily lives of American communities and families. Such narratives serve to remind scholars of the prevalent role economic change plays in children and parents' lives, particularly as we cast our gaze out to the next 30 years of American life in light of our current financial picture.

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